

## **Henriette H. Lannes**

1899–1980

James Moore

That the Work in England is today so strongly rooted is preponderantly owed to a woman scarcely known. Active in London for nearly three decades; coping with all the difficulties of exile and a foreign language; subsuming the powerful resistance which any powerful affirmation lawfully evokes — this remarkable human being guaranteed here the Work's ethos, dynamic, and trajectory. Her name was Henriette Lannes.

The sobering death of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff on 29 October 1949 impacted on a unified Work in Paris but a diversified Work in London. Throughout the winter of 1949–1950 his senior pupil Madame Jeanne de Salzman urgently explored her scope to harmonise the activities of the four main English factions (adherents of J. G. Bennett, Jane Heap, Maurice Nicoll, and the late Piotr Ouspensky.) In early spring 1950, having finally established the roll-call of those provisionally prepared to work together under her guidance (evidently drawing a demurral from Nicoll), she convened a meeting at 46 Colet Gardens, West Kensington and presented Madame Lannes as her designated 'responsible' and plenipotentiary in England. Some sense of the challenge thereby accepted by Madame Lannes, and indeed of her stature, will be plain to informed readers from her powerful but inherently unstable Group 1, which initially comprised George Adie, J. G. Bennett, Alfred Etievan, Jane Heap, Reginald Hoare, Cynthia Pearce, Basil Tilley, Kenneth Walker, and Aubrey Wolton.

Who then was Henriette Lannes? And what factors had thrust her into this position?

### **Early Years**

Born on Sunday 12 November 1899 in the small village of Puyoo-Bearn in the Pyrenees, she came of peasant stock: simple, hardworking, devoutly Christian people inured to a life which, though richly textured, was physically stark. A childhood that imbued Henriette with a lifelong love of nature — trees, flowers and "my friends the animals" — ended prematurely when her father died. Immediately all her native resourcefulness was mobilised in aid of her mother's struggle for material survival; her formal education stopped, leaving her intellectual curiosity, if anything, heightened.

Henriette's emancipation from privation and rustic life began not long afterwards when the village priest secured a minor post in Paris, co-opting the widow Lannes as his housekeeper. There in the city styled by Gurdjieff "the capital of the world" young Mlle Lannes quickly established herself by dint of hard work. Her ensuing two decades await elucidation but they imparted an impressive cultural formation and a working knowledge of English.

By the time the ancient Basque capital of Guernica was devastated on 27 April 1937, Henriette re-emerges to view as linked to Henri Tracol head of a Republican press agency in Barcelona and Madrid. Providentially, however, any risk that her energies might be dissipated by political preoccupations was circumvented by her chance meeting with Jeanne de Salzman: "What has this woman got that I have not got?"

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## Engagement with the Work in France

Early in 1938 Henriette and her husband M. Tracol were received into Mme de Salzmans's circle at Sevres, which included Rene Daumal, orientalist and author of the prize-winning poetic work *Le Contre-Ciel*, his wife Vera, Philippe Lavastine, Marthe de Gaigneron, Pauline de Dampierre, Bernard Lemaitre, and later Luc Dietrich.

Virtually no relevant books had been published in French. Utterly fresh, the Work impacted overwhelmingly on Henriette: "When I heard the ideas I was dumbfounded. I could not get them out of my mind. They haunted me night and day. I felt they were true." A second and of course more radical shock occurred in October 1940 when Mme de Salzman presented her group to Gurdjieff himself at 6 Rue des Colonels Renard: "What did he represent? Who was he? What did this being, this force, signify? I remember the ring of a deep and painful question while I was watching and listening to him: 'What is there then between you and me?'"

The social context of this meeting challenges today's imagination. Until its liberation on 25 August 1944, Paris was in the iron grip of German forces, its citizens demoralised, malnourished, and subject to curfew. Not only did Henriette engage intensively in this unique Work chapter (sketched by Pierre Schaeffer, Rene Zuber, and Henri Tracol himself) but put herself at risk in supporting Jewish group members. In late 1945, Henriette's niece Lise Tracol became Gurdjieff's housekeeper at Colonels Renard. Meanwhile Henriette herself was growing in stature, and by 8 August 1948 when Gurdjieff's car crash drew to him disparate Anglo-American followers of his ideas, he had mandated her to guide French pupils of her own. The large and still important group which she accordingly built in Lyon (later served by Henri Thomasson) held her interest and commitment to her life's end.

When Gurdjieff died we glimpse Henriette consoling Elizabeth Mayall (later Mrs Bennett) in terms conveying her oecumenical idealism: "Remember Elizabeth, this is for all of us; French, English, and American. Remember. Remember we are all together." In such a mind-set she arrived in London and took up residence at Colet Gardens with her daughter Anne Marie and Lise Tracol.

## At Work with the London Groups

Madame Henriette Lannes (to this name she reverted when M. Tracol remarried) was first and foremost a spiritual benefactor, and iconic history could do worse than seat her before her English groups: a good looking woman of medium stature, conservatively dressed but with an amber necklace and a small brooch shaped like a sea-horse; her fine hair is brushed straight back with a black segment disconcertingly dividing the silver. The eyes prevail.

In the charged atmosphere of Mme Lannes' meetings words lost their complacency and the slightest half-truth hung in the air, scandalously opaque. No group notes, no tape recordings — absolutely nothing — can convey her confrontative being. She did not split metaphysical hairs or retreat into a single grand verity, wearing it threadbare by endless iteration. She knew all her pupils in their individual idiocy and individual potential, and by a dangerous and exacting empathy shocked them into opening their eyes. She used humour; she could mimic. Possessing a cornucopia of literary, mythic, and folkloric allusion, she often tendered Gurdjieffian orthodoxies within a perennial tradition: the scattered limbs of Osiris were gathered to new metaphorical effect, and under startling scriptural authority the moving, emotional, and intellectual centres

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conjoined to host an epiphanic presence — "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew: Chap. 18, Verse 20.) Needless to say, Mme Lannes' command of the orthodox idiom of The System was assured — manifest not only in speech but in her major thematic study papers, commencing with 'Organic Life on Earth and the Influences acting on it and on us' (4 Dec. 1971.)

Over and above her punishing schedule of groups (minimally two a night) and innumerable administrative meetings and private consultations, Mme Lannes instigated and pursued many ancillary activities e.g. sharing the triumphs and disasters of her cherished Puppet Team. Various of Gurdjieff's dicta she translated into concrete fields of action. "We always make a profit" inspired an incorporated trading company uniquely aimed at exploring the relationship of commercial and Work values. "Take the understanding of the East and the knowledge of the West, and then search" underpinned her inter-disciplinary 'Science Study' which — served by pupils commanding many fields in the sciences and humanities — attempted an ideological confrontation between modern science and traditional knowledge. (The unpublished Proceedings of this Study, extending over seven years, constitute an unrivalled memorial of Mme Lannes' thought.)

What little time Mme Lannes reserved for herself might see her at Picketts Cottage, her thatched country retreat near Woodcote, working in her beloved flower garden or seated in summer by her traditional Gipsy caravan, reading, dealing with correspondence, and smoking an occasional Camel cigarette.

### Challenging Contexts

Given Mme Lannes' inner orientation, it would be easy for a naive idealism to overlook her practical achievement in *Work Realpolitik*. Despite Mme de Salzman's endorsement, London did not fall 'ready-cooked' into her protege's mouth. Only by diplomacy and sheer force of being did Mme Lannes convince so many of England's long-entrenched Ouspenskian 'barons'; win the respect of the formidable Jane Heap and the friendship of the senior 'Obligatories' (Movements) teacher Rose Mary Nott; and later integrate the intellectual stream of Maurice Nicoll. Even then, all was not Roses, Roses. Different people understandably entertained different agendas and indications are that the important London-New York axis was dominated by Ouspensky's former pupils Basil Tilley and Lord Pentland.

No contextualisation of Mme Lannes' rock-like 'Gurdjieffian fundamentalism' would be complete without passing allusion to the successive waves of *nouvelle orientalism* which beat upon it — waves which affected the Work globally but which were particularly registered in England. J. G. Bennett's force, flair for self-publicity, authorial capacity, and weathercock messianism swept away Reginald Hoare and Aubrey Wolton, and generally multiplied problems. His contentions (1958) that the Indonesian mystic Pak Subuh was Gurdjieff's wisdom-figure Ashiata Shiemash from *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*; and (1965) that the questionable figure of Idries Shah came from the 'Sarmoung Monastery' cited in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, might seem with the benefit of hindsight merely to invite a sardonic humour but Mme Lannes had to confront them on the spot. Nearer to home the ageing Society President Kenneth Walker unexpectedly hinted (1964 on) at his ancillary indebtedness to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; then (1970) the Society Vice-President Magnus Wechsler converted to Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche; and only at the cost of historical revisionism can the arguably distracting influence of

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Krishnamurti be decoupled from Mme de Salzmann's known and regular attendance at his talks in Saanen, Switzerland.

### **The Curtain Falls**

For more than a quarter of a century Henriette Lannes worked on unremittingly, never deviating from her commitment to Gurdjieff alone. Then, gradually, in the late 1970s, her health began to betray her; the English climate grew insupportable and her winter breaks in France became more extended. Younger London groups were now afforded contact with her at the expense of older; she battled tenaciously with her infirmities, offering up her last reserves to her ideals. In early spring 1979 the unwelcome rumour that she would not return from France hardened into fact. On 27 June she sent to each member of Oak, Poplar, Fir, Sycamore, Willow, and Pine (significantly all her groups were named after trees) the following message:

This is to say to all of you, who have worked a long time with me, *au revoir*... I use a French word that you all understand because it is the only one I can use. Those faithful to Gurdjieff and the extraordinary message he has brought shall see one another again — this is something I can have no doubt about... But I have to ask you to be more sure of what it means to be faithful. It is not to 'believe' in the truth of the ideas, not even to become able to pass them on to others. It is an assimilation, quite comparable on a different level, to what our body does with food — in order to live. The truth they contain has to be digested in order to 'become flesh.' This is a great ambition, but also the challenge we have accepted together, and which creates between us the link that permits me to say, with confidence, *au revoir*.

Nearly another year Mme Lannes struggled on in France — hard days for her, her family, and her pupils. An untoward and major difficulty in implementing long-meditated plans to support her added an increment of painful drama, yet she did not lack willing aid from Lyon and London... Henriette Lannes died from liver cancer at 40 Avenue Valioud, 69000 St Foy, at around 10 p.m. on Wednesday, 28 May 1980.

### **Towards an Evaluation**

To 'sum up' such a life would be an impertinence. Yet certainly Mme Lannes' epoch in London (1950–1978) was one of buoyant expansion realised in the face of grave difficulties: an epoch of unification; an epoch when, within a quadrupled membership, a responsible English nucleus was progressed a generation; an epoch when an unassailable material and administrative 'hearth' was built for a Work which never lacked its validating flame — altogether a breathtaking achievement.

And yet, and yet... consider Robert Browning's lines:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for?

Do they not ironically demand, if only as proof of the rank of Madame's aspiration, the acknowledgement that in some sense her life ended in poignant regret at unrealised hopes?

Of Mme Lannes' unfolding relationship with Mme de Salzman it is difficult to speak with propriety and impossible to speak with objectivity; the lower cannot judge the higher. And, nevertheless, history is due every crumb of contemporary witness. If London's dispensation and 'vibrations' evidenced their sisterly *entente* up until the 1970s, it thereafter more and more suggested Mme Lannes' dutiful deferral to Mme de Salzman's authority. That these two remarkable human beings remained undivided essentially and in commitment to Gurdjieff — who can doubt? But they were not clones. Mme Lannes did not believe that the film *Meetings with Remarkable Men* would initiate a brave new epoch; she did not place disproportionate and arguably uncanonical emphasis on long 'sittings' with eyes closed; still less did Mme Lannes consider Orage's hallowed English-language text of *Beelzebub* so impenetrable as to warrant the substantial revision ultimately effected in 1992 (incidentally with minimal prior reference to the London groups.)

Madame Lannes had visions of a Gurdjieff Work with a wholesome social face, which slowly, over decades or even centuries, would act as a spiritualising leaven in diurnal life; she even foresaw the institution of special schools and hospitals. In practice, however, her own epoch's supervening goals confined her to small inconclusive pilot studies. Madame's implacable love for all her pupils translated itself into demands which could be felt as fierce, even exorbitant; in a handful of her disciples (that remarkable individual the late Malcolm Gibson springs instantly to mind) she evidently cultivated a special resonance. Finally, though, it seemed no-one fully realised her lofty hopes, and there were moments when a painful sense of her disappointment came through.

Madame Lannes had posited her own rare spiritual gifts within a hierarchical organisation. Indeed she built one. But she perfectly grasped that in the enlarging fissures of an enlarging institution flourished such *Fleurs du Mal* as factionalism, careerism, nepotism, over-dependency, and social narcissism. Perhaps because of this she often spoke of life as the teacher. Perhaps because of this she insisted: "We have to recognise a master in ourselves. We are alone in the face of this as we shall be alone in the face of death."

### Mysteries

Who would spoil everything by masquerading as a representative disciple of such a woman? God forbid! God forbid! Yet who, of those touched by her magic, would shrink from bearing unnegotiable witness? As for me, only the grace of Henriette Lannes' mysterious promise disarms the desolate certitude that I shall not look upon her like again... One year after her passing, on 27 May 1981, Madame de Salzman held a special Studio group for certain people. She said that if we, the most indebted to Madame Lannes, could touch others spiritually, transmitting a definite quantity of finer energy, Madame Lannes need not come down to earth again... We sat in immaculate silence.

Let us leave deconstructionist crows to pick at the 'inconsistency' of these two mysteries: re-engagement with faithful pupils and freedom from further incarnation. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." (Corinthians I: Chap. 13, Verse 12.)

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James Moore gratefully attended Henriette Lannes' London groups from October 1957 to December 1978; his 1991 biography *Gurdjieff: the Anatomy of a Myth* is dedicated to her.

## **Postscript: the Lannes Legacy**

Though Madame Lannes' being is not reducible to her doing,  
some milestones of her dispensation warrant mention:

- 1955 The establishment (6 October) of a de jure charitable Work vehicle The Society for Research into the Development of Man.
- 1957 The acquisition (19 May) of large premises in West London. The building and dedication (23 September) of a Movements studio.
- 1962 The launch (11 April) of the Comonaim Import-Export Ltd experiment. A semi-open demonstration (13 May) of Movements at Rudolph Steiner Hall. The successful integration (October) of 40 of the late Maurice Nicoll's pupils, including Sam Copley and Peter Gloster.
- 1963 The founding (July) of The Guild for Research into Craftsmanship and its acquisition (October) of substantial premises near Windsor for Work activities.
- 1964 The change of name (28 January) of The Society for Research into the Development of Man to The Gurdjieff Society. The successful integration (October) of the late Jane Heap's pupils, including Michael Currer-Briggs and John Lester.
- 1969 The extending of help (spring) to novice Gurdjieff students in Norway resulting in the consolidation of their work and its ensuing guidance by Brenda Tripp. The production and filming (July) of a marionette play 'The Equipage' dramatising Gurdjieff's metaphor of carriage, horse, driver, and Master. The constitution (2 October) and on-going supervision (1969–76) of 'The Science Study.'
- 1972 The creating (July) of 'Skill Gallery' — an on-going public exhibition of specially selected craft pieces made at the Guild and its affiliated Pembridge Studio.

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